Southern Baptists End Ties with Baptist World Alliance

The Southern Baptist Convention voted Tuesday with little discussion to withdraw from the Baptist World Alliance, with a convention leader adding tolerance of homosexuality to a list of grievances alleged earlier against the global organization of Baptists started in 1905.

Paige Patterson, a member of an SBC/BWA study committee that first proposed severing ties in December, accused the BWA of including members that tolerate homosexuality—namely the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

“The American Baptist convention last year established the Evergreen Baptist Association,” said Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. “The Evergreen Baptist Association is an association of churches in the American Baptist convention that is committed to being a gay-friendly place for churches.”

“Why not delay this until a later time?” Patterson asked. “We can no longer afford in this particular day, when the press for gay marriage is on, to be in alliance with denominations that support in any form or fashion gay marriage.”

“What you give your money and name to, you give tacit approval to,” Patterson said.

The study committee that called for ending BWA ties in December cited different reasons, including a drift toward liberalism and an increasing “anti-American” tone at BWA gatherings. A second report, approved by the SBC Executive Committee in February, acknowledged that a vote accepting the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship into BWA membership last year confirmed the committee’s impression that it is time to leave, but said it wasn’t the only factor.

Just one messenger was recognized to speak against the recommendation before debate was cut off by a motion from the floor. Larry Walker, a messenger of First Baptist Church in Dallas, said some member bodies in the BWA consider Southern Baptists “liberal” because women are allowed to wear makeup, but they don’t pull out of the organization in protest.
“We may not agree with everything they do, but in this centennial year is there something we can do to resolve and renew this relationship?” he asked.

Wiley Drake, a messenger from California, made the motion for ending debate and voting immediately on the issue. “I believe our committee has done an excellent job and we need to move forward with this and sever our ties with this [group]. We try to love everybody, but there comes a time when you need to do things out of love.”

BWA officials interviewed by EthicsDaily.com said they were disappointed both in the result of the vote and the way it was presented.

BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz called it “strange” and “unfortunate” to abruptly cut off debate over such an emotional issue.

Tony Cupit, director of evangelism and education for the BWA, said it was “unchristian and unfair” to inject homosexuality into the discussion without allowing the accused a chance to respond.

Paul Montacute, director of Baptist World Aid, said, “Hopefully the lost sheep will come back into the fold one day.”

BWA president Billy Kim said his church prayed for 100 days this year about the Southern Baptist proposal to leave the BWA. “I still have high hopes that an agreement can be reached so that the SBC will continue as an active member of the BWA,” Kim said in a press release.

The SBC Executive Committee in February approved recommendations of a study committee for pulling out of the BWA, saying the group “no longer effectively communicates to the unsaved a crystal clear gospel message that our Lord Jesus Christ is solely sufficient for salvation.”

The committee said a decision by BWA leadership to admit the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a member was a factor in the recommendation but that it wasn’t the primary reason. SBC leaders regard the CBF, a moderate breakaway group from the SBC, as a competitor.

An original committee report in December described “an increasing influence of positions contrary to the New Testament and to Baptist doctrines” being advocated in various commissions and committees of the BWA.
It also noted “a decided anti-American tone” in recent years, along with emphasis on women as pastors, frequent criticism of the SBC International Mission Board, refusal to allow open discussion on issues like abortion and funding of “questionable enterprises” through Baptist World Aid, the BWA’s relief and development agency.

“Repeated appeals to BWA leadership have resulted in no substantive changes and few of any consequence,” the study committee stated.

Leaders from BWA and the SBC met in April in a last-ditch effort to resolve differences. After six hours in private, they issued a statement saying there were no plans to change the recommendation for Southern Baptists to withdraw from the group, but committing to continuing dialogue and expressing hope that the SBC might re-enter membership if differences are resolved in the future.

Speaking in support of the recommendation to sever ties, Patterson on Tuesday added that Southern Baptists should not be affiliated “with some of the denominations in the BWA who do not believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture and regularly call it into question.”

Saying some have questioned whether by ending ties with the group Southern Baptists abdicate their position in the world, Patterson said the International Mission Board “will continue its ministry in far more nations than are touched in any way by the Baptist World Alliance,” along with LifeWay Christian Resources, seminaries and volunteer missionaries from churches that also have ties with Baptists overseas.

“Nothing in the world changes except we take money we have been giving to the BWA and put it directly into efforts that change our world,” Patterson said.

Cupit said he found Patterson’s assertion that the IMB has relationships in more places than the BWA “hard to believe.”

“There are many conventions and unions that have no contact with the IMB,” he said. “That was a statement without any verification. I don’t believe that is true. We have 211 member bodies.”

“The BWA has far better relationships with Baptist people around the world than the IMB,” Cupit said.
The American Baptist Churches General Board voted to accept the 30-church Evergreen Baptist Association as the denomination’s 35th region last June.

The association, based in Kent, Wash., describes itself as a “culturally diverse people who are one in Christ and who value the liberties of our American Baptist heritage” on a Web site.

The association organized out of the American Baptist Churches in the Northwest, after that region sought to expel gay-friendly churches. Several churches have been disfellowshipped from American Baptist regions for membership in the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, a 50-church pro-gay organization.

Marcia Patton, executive minister of the Evergreen Association, said there is nothing in the Evergreen association’s bylaws, mission statement or policies that identify it has having any agenda regarding the homosexual issue.

“To be identified by such by parties outside our fellowship says more about others’ agenda than it does our own,” she said in an e-mail. She said there are Welcoming and Affirming churches in her region, as well as about 12 others American Baptist regions, but that the organization doesn’t define itself “by the agenda of some of our churches, but by the documents and work we do together.”

The American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., General Board in 1992 adopted a statement affirming “that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” Other statements have encouraged dialogue on the issue.

Bob Allen is managing editor of EthicsDaily.com. Robert Parham, BCE executive director, contributed to this story.